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THE SATURDAY READ

Little new on the Stooges

The Stooges
The Authorized and Illustrated Story
Robert Matheu
Abrams: 192 pp., $35

EVELYN MCDONNELL

Iggy Pop walks on a sea of hands. In the photo, shot in Cincinnati in 1970, the singer, then 23, stands upright while fans' hands snake up his calves. He is, quintessentially, shirtless; the muscles of his torso ripple. A palpable energy powers the still image. Every fiber is turned toward him.

It's hard not to get a little hagiographic when discussing the Stooges, so extreme is their story, so complete their devotion to their cause. That cause, of course, was a sort of nihilism. Rarely have exuberance and wonder so deeply into the murk of violence, boredom, drugs, chaos, insanity and sadomasochism — in both their music and their lives. You can't help but rubberneck at the story of this high-speed train hurtling off the tracks.

Yet when that story is recounted in the overwrought and under-thought style of Richard Meltzer wannabe Robert Matheu, it begins to bloat. His "The Stooges: The Authorized and Illustrated Story" is full of the dead air of hype.

The Stooges were as important as a rock band can be. They deserve a better chronicler than Matheu, an able photographer whose primary qualification as a historian is that he has known the band since its early days in Michigan and has therefore been designated its official "Stoogeologist."

For all his acuity with a camera, Matheu is a writer of purple prose and bad analogies — the most unspeakably awful of which comes early: "The Stooges suffered through more brutal ups and downs than a biker brothel on initiation night."

Infatuated with his own voice, Matheu tells unofficial Stoogeologists little they don't already know.

Then again, authorized biographies are usually sources of carefully selected information, not the whole picture. For a more engaging, informative and well-written history of the Stooges, read Paul Trynka's 2007 biography "Iggy Pop: Open Up and Bleed."

Matheu's book may have been created partly in reaction to Trynka's work. But by glossing over inconvenient subjects — guitarist Ron Asheton's obsession with the Third Reich, Pop's use of gay images and lyrics — the authorized and illustrated "The Stooges" remains incomplete.

The photos, though, make up for some of the failings of the text. In his thoughtful introduction, Alice Cooper writes that the Stooges and the Doors were the only bands he wanted to see every night because you didn't know what was going to happen.

Like Jim Morrison, Pop was both showman and shaman. He was extremely theatrical in his presentation, but once onstage, and even in photo shoots, he channeled something primal and often (self-) destructive.

This comes through in a shot of Pop doing a split in flowered briefs and thigh-high boots. Or in an image from the ill-fated short for the Stooges' first album, in which the singer is caught hurtling through the air over his seated bandmates, who wince in anticipation of his crash to ground.

In a 1968 Matheu photo, Pop is still eat-like and flexible as he mounts a stack of Marshall amps while bassist Mike Watt roars on his knees.

"The Stooges" is not only a forum for Matheu's work: There are many pictures by other photographers, and reviews of Stooges' albums by different writers, including Dave DiMartino and Brian J. Bowe (whose chapter on "Metallic K.O." left me wishing he were the official Stoogeologist).

Still, certain images — like the famous photos of a dazed Pop bleeding from wounds inflicted by either tossed objects or his own hand — have been left out.

Asheton died shortly before Matheu's book went to press. Pop has said that the Stooges, who reunited in 2003 after 28 years apart, will live on, with James Williamson on guitar. (Pop first hired Williamson in 1973, demoting Asheton to bass.) But I'm not convinced that the original guitarist's passing shouldn't be the final chapter of the Stooges story.

Woefully unsuccessful and undervalued in their prime, the Stooges have generally been granted their place in history as punk progenitors (except by the idiots at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame). "The Stooges" is most interesting in its documentation of their crazy prime. But it doesn't look like an experience anyone would want to — or could — live through twice.

McDonnell is the author of "Mamarama: A Memoir of Sex, Kids and Rock 'n' Roll" and an Annenberg fellow at USC.

SHOWMAN: Lead singer Iggy Pop, typically shirtless, says the Stooges will live on.

Hercule Poirot is back on the case

JULIA KELLER

With sales of her books topping 4 billion copies worldwide, this much is clear: Agatha Christie (1890-1976) knew how to spin a mystery. Now it turns out she knew how to live one too.

In a plot twist fit for one of her delectable tales, Christie secretly stashed a finished short story amid the notebooks and journals in which she sketched out her books. The almost 6,000-word story, never published in her lifetime, features Hercule Poirot, the dapper detective made famous in several of Christie's novels.

After Christie's daughter, Rosalind Margaret Hicks, died in 2004, the story was discovered in her mother's papers, stored in Hicks' attic. Titled "The Incident of the Dog's Ball," it was published in England three months ago.

Its first American publication is in this month's instalment of the Strand (*strandmag.com*), the mystery magazine with editorial offices in Birmingham, Mich.

Now in its 10th year, the Strand is a rejuvenated version of the British periodical of the same name that, before its demise in 1950 after more than half a century of operation, routinely published such renowned authors as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, W. Somerset Maugham — and Christie.

"Agatha Christie published dozens of stories in the old Strand, which is why we're so excited," says Andrew F. Gulli, the Strand's managing editor. He calls "Dog's Ball" "a vintage Agatha Christie whodunit."

Gulli has made a specialty of such finds: In earlier issues, he published heretofore unknown works by Mark Twain and Graham Greene.

Keller is cultural critic at the Chicago Tribune.

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